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Courtesy in Correspondence

WRITING LETTERS is a skill; writing courteous letters is a social art worth developing.

Courtesy means that you refuse a favour in so considerate a way as to keep a friend, and do not grant credit in so grudging a way as to kill all hope of future business.

Considerations of manner and demeanour cannot be dismissed as frivolous or unimportant. They are significant elements in the lives of everyone from a statesman engaging in international diplomacy to the husband and wife making a go of marriage. In business, our accomplishments are enhanced by our observance of decorum and manners.

Every individual is required to operate within the symbol system of his culture. He uses recognized patterns of behaviour to demonstrate that he has the qualities that are respected by his fellow men.

Confucius said: "It is good manners which make the excellence of a neighbourhood. No wise man will settle where they are lacking."

It may be true, as some people say, that manners have progressively deteriorated as society has receded from the patriarchal stage through industrial revolution to the affluent age. One of the dangers in the growth of the democratic spirit is that people come to take bad manners as a demonstration of freedom from the discipline of non-democracy, having not yet learned that the power of the people has its duties as well as its liberties.

How can we define good manners? To be well-mannered is to do the thing you should do although you are not obliged to do it. This means being considerate of others, taking no unfair advantage, avoiding personalities that hurt people, and never being intentionally impolite.

Manners are of more importance than laws. The law touches us only here and there and now and then; manners vex or please us, exalt or debase us, constantly. Moses is known as the "great law-giver", particularly because he inscribed the Ten Commandments, but he entered the field of manners, too. He

went beyond the "musts" of a well-organized society, and prescribed the conduct of a gentleman: to be gentle with those who are afflicted, to refrain from gossip, to respect the aged, and to be kind even to strangers.

No matter to what station in life you belong, or how highly educated you may be, you owe courtesy to your fellow men. Here is an illustration from the life of Sir Winston Churchill: On a day in May 1941 when he had already been on his feet in the House of Commons with hard news about the fighting in Crete, he rose for a second time with a piece of welcome news, but he apologized all the same for interrupting the House: "I do not know whether I might venture, with great respect, to intervene for one moment. I have just received news that the *Bismarck* is sunk."

Good manners include tact, the art of all arts. Tact means taking pains and some trouble to see that others are not neglected, and doing the kind thing in a pleasant way. Great leaders are tactful in dealing with people, taking many precautions which lesser men neglect.

When writing letters

Have you ever stopped to think how self-revealing your letters are? Socrates said to a young man who was introduced to him to have his capabilities tested: "Talk in order that I may see you." In their letters people reveal and picture themselves in all their individuality.

Much of business today is done by correspondence. We may close the biggest deal without meeting the person with whom we transact the business. We must read his letters carefully so as to get his point, and write our own letters carefully so as to convey our meaning.

More than that, we need to write letters of good will. It is courteous to make it evident to your correspondent that you are writing him cheerfully and not as a chore.

Congeniality makes an important contribution to

your happiness, even if it is expressed in face of hostility. You belittle your dignity if you allow a discourteous correspondent to set the pattern for your reply. There is no surer sign of a great mind than that it refuses to notice annoying expressions and the cross-grained humours of fellow citizens and colleagues. As the Superman boasted in Nietzsche's doctrine: "I have to carry what is heavy; and what matter if beetles and May-bugs also alight on my load!"

Nothing is so disarming to an angry opponent as composure. Dogs bark at the slightest stir, before they have seen whether it be caused by friend or foe, but man's reason gives him the chance to deliberate. Instead of dashing off an out-of-temper letter with its sarcastic phrases and blunt aggressiveness we can analyse the situation, take command of it, and avoid a shabby display of peevishness.

When a man loses his temper he also loses his sense of dignity, his common sense, and his feeling for justice. It is a good rule, when you are so exasperated that you simply must get something off your chest, to hold over your letter for a second look tomorrow.

Respect others and yourself

Tune in on people. One of the surest ways to win a man is to show respect for his knowledge and deference to his person.

There is no more evident sign of intellectual ill breeding than to speak or write slightly of any knowledge you yourself do not happen to possess. Your urge to show yourself superior will dig a hole for your pride.

Men are fighting a constant battle against oblivion, and do not like being taken for granted. The craving of people for personal recognition is a deep and fundamental human need. Your letters should be written so as to make your correspondent feel important and capable.

Courtesy demands, therefore, that you treat your correspondent's name and position and title with respect. Some people, but they are few, do not care what you call them so long as they get the information they want. Most people respect their names, and expect you to do so too. Your letter, though it be truthful, must not rub your correspondent the wrong way. Give him nourishment for his self-esteem.

It is well to keep in mind that the letter you write may be read by others than the man to whom you address it: his secretary, his assistant, the person who will have to deal directly with the matter about which you write, and the filing clerks. To humiliate your correspondent in the eyes of these people is to impart a grievous wound.

Every letter, even the most official, is capable of a peculiar dignity in the form of it, peculiar in that

it is fitting to your correspondent, to its subject matter, and to you. It is void of arrogance and yet not condescending.

A good letter

There is general agreement that if a letter is worth writing it is worth writing well, and no excuse should be allowed to interfere. A firm may spend millions of dollars to advertise its products, only to have some untrained, uninterested or thoughtless clerk spoil the effect by writing an uninspired or shoddy letter.

There is room for honest pride in the successful communication of ideas. Despite all the imposing titles he won in a lifetime of service to humanity, Franklin described himself in his Will: "I, Benjamin Franklin, Printer . . ."

To be good communication, your letter ought to have a tendency to benefit the reader; it should be written distinctly and clearly. Your words should be the most expressive that the language affords provided that they are generally understood.

But there is more to it than that. Good letters are not merely the written record of information we desire to reach someone else. We are losing their greatest effectiveness unless we use them to influence people. Very few propositions are decided by pure logic, but involve the imagination and feelings.

Good composition in letter-writing does not mean using rhyme or alliteration, but the graceful expression of a creative spirit. It changes the writing of letters from a dull grind to an exciting exercise in which your mind gives life to your words.

The basis of all this is to find out the dominant interest of the person to whom you are writing, and include in your letter some appeal to that interest.

You cannot just pick up an incoming letter and start dictating a reply. Take a look at what you want to express and then think about how to put it down. Ask yourself what are your correspondent's interests, and write about them. You will be surprised to notice how few are the questions and how unpenetrating are the comments you receive about your own activities. Think what interesting things you could tell if someone pushed the proper button!

When you write a letter you are in competition with many other writers for your correspondent's attention and interest. This is not a competition in which the winner is the man who writes most poetically, or most grammatically, or most fluently, or most ornately. It is one in which the prize goes to the person who can best guide and inform and persuade. To give information is one function of a letter. To persuade to some action or belief is another function. To combine these in friendly language requires the greatest skill and a warm heart.

All correspondence will adhere to the simple rules

of common decency, but you can go further. Let your letters have something in them not common and ordinary. Just as small talk is necessary in social intercourse, so small talk is needed in a letter. It helps to bridge the gap between thought and thought; it brings down the technicalities and abstractions to the human level.

The exchange of ideas

A sense of participation and sharing characterizes successful communication, and this is helped when you convey something of your feelings and motives.

The most important executive characteristic of which we are certain is the ability to communicate two ways — outward and inward. While writing in such a way as to give your reader the opportunity to apprehend your meaning readily and precisely, be sure to give him his turn to express his thoughts so that you understand them.

The letters exchanged between you and a customer or supplier are nothing more than a conversation between two people talking of their affairs. They should have the grace and urbanity you would use in a club lounge or over a coffee table.

During these conversations by mail you will run into these situations: sometimes you are right; sometimes both are partly right; sometimes the other person is right. Because of these possibilities, you need to pay attention, not to listen by halves. What your correspondent is saying to you may be misguided, but it serves to bring your thinking into focus. The great orator of ancient times, Cicero, left it on record that he always studied his adversary's case with as great, if not with still greater, intensity than his own. Cicero believed that he who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.

When a troublesome suggestion has been made, restate it clearly and simply for two reasons: to make sure that you are both writing about the same thing, and to make evident your sympathy and understanding.

Every wise person expects, and welcomes, objections and opposition to his ideas and plans when he first brings them forward. He appreciates having these protests out in the open so that he can meet them and lead their author toward a different way of thinking.

In developing this written conversation it is important to be affable in phraseology and unvaryingly moderate. We all know people who are handicapped by the fact that even when their points are valid they present them with such screechiness as to make us back away.

If someone has difficulty in taking in what you have written, think first whether what you wrote was as clear as you could have made it. The fault may be in yourself, and to change a fault in oneself is much

easier than to change the intellectual capacity of another.

People require different periods for mental digestion, but everyone requires some time to assimilate what he reads. We should allow for this in our correspondence, and by simplicity of explanation make the digestive process easier. It is less difficult to move your correspondent from one point of view to its opposite by short steps than long ones. Show him that you have explored alternatives and have objectively analysed their possibilities and drawbacks.

Always leave a way of escape open to your correspondent. There is much to be said for the old Chinese doctrine of "face-saving".

And know when to give in. There was a philosopher who argued with an emperor, and lost. "I am never ashamed," he remarked, "to be confuted by one who is master of fifty legions."

Constructive and positive

It is never very satisfactory merely to clear your correspondent's mind of error; it is equally necessary to set it thinking correctly. Here is another area where your personal interest counts. You can dip a thousand pens into a thousand ink-pots without moving the mind of your correspondent an inch, but if you pluck a phrase of interest to him from the activity of your mind, you have him in the hollow of your hand.

Charming ways are quick winners. These are your expression of consideration and goodwill. Far from being evidence of cowardice, intelligent compromise is often the essence of courageous wisdom. When you yield on small points which are of concern to your correspondent, then out of sheer chivalry he is likely to give in to you on points which are vital to your case.

We can say that the first thing a correspondent looks for in a letter is friendliness. Then he seeks some spark of emotional appeal or response.

These are not achieved by having beside you an array of pleasant words and sentiments for insertion in your letters. Such a list may help you to express yourself, but unless your friendliness is real you are putting up a fragile sham front.

Next on the list, or perhaps it should be first, your correspondent requires that your reply be prompt. People may differ about the form a letter should take, how lengthy it should be, and many other points, but no one can successfully argue against the need for promptness in writing.

Some offices have the rule that all letters must be acknowledged immediately, even though action on them may be delayed. This courteous gesture serves to assure the reader that his letter has been received and will be given full attention.

"Discretion" is a good word for the letter-writer to have in mind. Take no liberties, either in blaming

or in complimenting. Intimacy is not an excuse for rough manners, nor for telling the truth out of place or unnecessarily. Prudence in letter-writing will make up for many lacks.

If, in spite of all your efforts to be moderate and to compromise, you must disagree with your correspondent, do it gently. Avoid delivering final judgments. Dogmatism is all right in a railroad time-table, but it has little place in the discussion of a commercial transaction or a personal problem.

One of the greatest talents is that of knowing when to give way, and then to yield with good grace. You thereby remove all appearance of constraint, and like the warriors in *King Henry V*, sheathe your swords for lack of argument.

Complaint letters

There is no more testing exercise in business than the handling of complaint letters. Do not do it grudgingly.

A letter of complaint is advance warning of a possible rupture with your correspondent. A most effective tactic is to treat it as a constructive suggestion about how to improve your service. Tell your correspondent he has done you a good turn. A quite moderate degree of conciliatory behaviour will placate your correspondent and win him over to the adjustment you suggest.

Above all, if you or your firm are in the wrong, admit it quickly and whole-heartedly. Instead of trying out an alibi, or working around to your confession by degrees, come right out and say "You are entirely correct" or "You are quite right to complain". One of Confucius' most famous sayings is that "a man who has made a mistake and doesn't correct it is making another mistake".

Seldom is it safe to joke about a complaint. People with complaints usually crave sympathy, not humour. Sarcasm is a sharp weapon and is sure to leave a deep wound. To make your correspondent appear ridiculous may give you a narrow sort of satisfaction, but result in grievous harm to your firm or your cause.

Your letter of apology for a mistake need not be tear-stained, but it should be sincere and should evidence your integrity and chivalry. As Princess Victoria wrote in her diary: "People will readily forget an insult or an injury when others own their fault and express sorrow or regret at what they have done." The letter of apology should be signed by an officer of importance in your organization. This demonstrates to the man with a grievance that he is someone of account.

Do not let your people bottle up complaint letters. Keep a "hot line" open. If an employee takes half a day to decide that a complaint is worth passing upstairs to his manager, and the manager hesitates

for a day before admitting that a customer has found fault with someone or something under his management, and one of your assistants holds back the letter until you are in a receptive frame of mind — then you have lost the priceless advantage of quick action.

On the other hand — appreciation

Courtesy is not only in response to some challenge or act. It is outgoing, seeking means for expression. The worst sin toward our fellow creatures, said the sharp-tongued George Bernard Shaw, is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them.

To praise good work or actions heartily is in some measure to take part in them. Because there are many times when it is necessary to deal sternly with people it seems only sensible to take advantage of every opportunity to recognize and compliment them. Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote with bitterness to the Earl of Chesterfield: "I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little."

When someone writes you a letter of particular charm or ready understanding, do not shy away from writing to express your cordial appreciation.

We are not machines

In any discussion of letter-writing, someone is sure to bring up the question of the modern way of doing things. They deny the fact that communication between people is not a variation of communication between computers.

Letter-writing demands that we write as if we were talking with one of our peers. If we must choose between discourteous abruptness and the snuffy and old-fashioned manners of courtesy, business will be the better and human relations will be happier if we lean toward the latter. Many schools have most lamentably neglected to provide pupils with alternative courtesy phrases to use instead of those which are condemned.

The greatest social asset that a man or woman can have is charm, and charm cannot exist without good manners. This does not mean slavishly following some rules, but using habitually manners polished by the continuous practice of kind impulses.

Courtesy is far and away the most effective quality to lift you above the crowd. It makes you treat every man with such consideration that his memory of you will be pleasant.

Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed a true idea of courtesy in his "Conduct of Life". Some people brush off good manners as being superficial, but Emerson said: "Manners are the happy ways of doing things. If they are superficial, so are the dew-drops which give such a depth to the morning meadows."